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ABSTRACT

Navajo family participation in the evaluation of their children is described in this paper. The setting for the study in St. Michael's Special School, Window Rock, Arizona. Pupils at this Navajo Reservation school were assigned to special education classes on the basis of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children. The author introudced into the evaluations the Hiskey-Nebraska Test of Learning Aptitude. This instrument, developed for use with deaf children, requires no verbal instructions or verbal responses. Use of this nonlanguage individual test when combined with family participation resulted in significantly different scores and much more satisfactory evaluations and placements than had previously used instruments and evaluation techniques. The current emphasis has been placed on the validation of the Hiskey-Nebraska Test of Learning Aptitude for use with bilingual minority group children. Norms tables for American Indian and Mexican American children will be developed. (FF)

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FAMILY PARTICIPATION IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF MINORITY CHILDREN *

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FAMILY PARTICIPATION IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF MINORITY CHILDREN

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Techniques and instruments commonly employed by the consulting and school psychologist in the psychological evaluation of minority group children have been questioned both by the psychologists and the families of those whose children were the subjects. Culturally biased items, inappropriate norm tables, primary language difficulties, error expectancies and the exclusion of the family from the evaluation, have all contributed to a growing disenchantment with the entire assessment process.

In an effort to find possible solutions to some of the problems, the author has conducted a continuing 10 year study to investigate non-verbal tests, primary language determination devices, teacher-parent-subject rating scales, in-home observations and peer group assessments for American Indian and Mexican American school children.

Family participation in the evaluation of minority group children was described in the paper. The setting for the study was St. Michael's Special School, Window Rock, Arizona. Pupils at this Navajo Reservation school were assigned to special education classes on the basis of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children. The author introduced into the evaluations, the Hiskey-Nebraska Test of Learning Aptitude. This instrument, developed for use with deaf

children, requires no verbal instructions or verbal responses. Use of this non-language individual test when combined with family participation resulted in significantly different scores and much more satisfactory evaluations and placements than previously used instruments and evaluation techniques.

The study has been continued under the sponsorship of the Arizona State Department of Education, Division of Special Education, and the Department of Psychology of Northern Arizona University. The current emphasis has been placed on the validation of the Hiskey-Nebraska Test of Learning Aptitude for use with bi-lingual minority group children. Norm tables for American Indian and Mexican American children will be developed.

FAMILY PARTICIPATION IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF MINORITY CHILDREN

Summary:

The Director of the Test Department, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Dr. Thomas Fitzgibbon, has said (1), "It is difficult to recall a period in which test results have been so surrounded by controversy, or when they have generated such intense reaction, either positive or negative, from large segments of the citizenry. One could cite many instances which bespeak the growing conviction on the part of minority groups that tests constitute for them an unfair obstacle to advancement in our society. Their responses range from demands for elimination of such testing to demands for development of more appropriate instruments or of modifications in the ways in which measures of performance are interpreted and used in selection decisions."

A recent order of the United States District Court, Phoenix, Arizona, states (2), "No children shall be considered for placement in classes for handicapped children unless an examination of developmental history, cultural background, and school achievement substantiates other findings or education handicap. This examination shall include estimates of adaptive behavior. Such examination of adaptive behavior shall include, but not be limited to a visit, with the consent of the parent or guardian, to the child's home by an appropriate professional adviser who may be a physician, psychologist, professional social worker or school nurse, and interviews of members of the child's family at their home.

If the language spoken in the home is other than English, such interviews shall be conducted in the language of the home." In the same decision the court further ordered that, "...if a child's primary language is determined to be other than English, school districts shall follow one or more of the listed objectives for evaluating a child for possible placement in a special education program:

(a) Use a psychologist fluent in both the child's primary language and English;

(b) Use an interpreter to assist the psychologist both with language and testing;

(c) Use test instruments which do not stress spoken language and which are considered valid and reliable performance measures of intellectual functioning such as the Wechsler Performance Scales.

...Parental approval must be obtained in writing prior to placement of any child in classes for handicapped children. Such written permission shall be obtained on a form written in English and the primary language of the home, if other than English..." (Underlining by author)

Three years prior to the court order cited above, St. Michael's Special School, Window Rock, Arizona, began a program of special education for handicapped children, chiefly Navajo or other Indian youngsters. The founder, Sister Marijane Ryan, F.M.M., wrote in an article, "Horizons of a Forgotten Land," (3) The Navajos live in this land of distant and elusive horizons. They love their land with a beautiful and sacred love.

Inured to the vagaries of the elements, they accept the wind, sun, lack of rain, and all the tempestuous quirks of nature with stoic resignation. This resignation also characterizes all life's matters both good and bad." She has earned the admiration and respect of all throughout the Southwest and beyond. Her major premise with respect to educational and physical handicaps is "There is no child who cannot be helped." More than one-hundred special problem children, ranging from those with severe Cerebral Palsy to the emotionally disturbed or educationally retarded have found their way from their hogans to St. Michael's. It has been the present author's good fortune to find his way there as a part-time staff psychologist.

What is unique about St. Michael's? Does it have outstanding, new, expensive and extensive facilities? Are the members of the staff nationally known specialists? Is the staff large and highly paid? The answer of course is "No" to all of these questions. What is it then? In a very real sense the success of the program at St. Michael's can be summarized in a single word, cooperation.

St. Michael's Special School is located at Window Rock, Arizona, the site of the headquarters of the Navajo Nation. The tribal council and other leaders of the largest Indian group in the United States give the school all assistance they can manage but exercise no direct control of its operation. The Catholic Order to which Sister Marijane belongs, owns the buildings and the land on which the school is situated but does not dictate the policies or program she has developed. The author has never observed an instance where the matter of church membership was referred to.

The State of Arizona Department of Education through its Special Education Division cooperates in both funding and technical assistance.

The United States Department of Health Education and Welfare has been responsible for project funding and program coordination. Psychological consultants have been members of the Department of Psychology and the Institute for Human Development of Northern Arizona University.

The cooperation which contributes most to the program, however, is that furnished by the parents and families of the pupils. Their participation begins even before their child is admitted. The first contact is a visit with their prospective pupil to the school. At this time a complete developmental history of the child is taken and the parents express their feelings concerning the type of handicap they believe their child has and their wishes relative to the type of program they think would be most beneficial. This conference is always conducted in their language, generally Navajo. Present also is a member of the professional staff in addition to the Director, Sister Marijane. Since Navajo is only now becoming a written language, the forms used are written in English but explained to the families in their language.

The next step is a visit to the child's home. The hogans, octaganol log or adobe huts, are located miles from the school on dirt roads which are frequently little more than wagon trails. In spite of the difficulty in reaching the child's house, the social worker, the teacher to whom the child may be assigned or the Director make their way there to observe interpersonal relationships, home environment and to talk with all members of the family. The time for the psychological evaluation is set, the parents agree to bring their son or daughter to the school and they are invited to observe as much of the evaluation as they wish. Some parents or relatives avail themselves of the opportunity to watch the testing through the two-way mirror test room at the school.

The battery of instruments used include visual and audiometric tests in the mobile trailer unit, as well as individual psychological tests. Since virtually all subjects examined are primary Navajo language speakers, a Navajo aide assists the Psychologist. Several non-language tests are incorporated, including the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (Performance Scale), the Raven Progressive Matrices, the Bender Visual Motor Gestalt, the Goodenough Draw-A-Person, the Chicago Non-Verbal, the Arthur Point Scale, the Kahn Test of Symbol Arrangement, the Hiskey-Nebraska Test of Learning Ability and others. The most productive for this group has been the Hiskey-Nebraska, a test developed for deaf children which requires no verbal instructions or verbal responses. The norm tables furnished in the manual must be viewed with caution, however, since they were prepared for use with Anglo children who cannot hear and the norm sample did not include minority group children who, in addition to other handicaps, come from a different culture and speak a different language. The author of this report is presently engaged in a project to validate the Hiskey test for the Navajos and Spanish-Americans using the WISC Performance Scale as a criterion. The next phase of his research will be the development of appropriate norm tables for these two groups.

Following the testing session, the evaluator studies the material collected in the conference with the parents, the home-visit report, the health records (usually from the U.S. Public Health Service), the teacher's comments and the data from his tests. He then writes a preliminary report for discussion at the staffing meeting which precedes assignment to a class. Each case is presented to the staff by the psychologist. If the decision has been reached to admit the student, a prescriptive program is jointly prepared and presented to the parents for their consideration, comments and approval. The importance of the input of the families to the success of this entire program cannot be overemphasized.

Not all of the population of St. Michael's come to the school without previous time spent in special education classes in other schools. Except for the Pre-school and Primary levels, virtually all of the children have had from one to five years of such experience. In not one instance could the author find a parent who had participated in the evaluation or placement for his child prior to arrival at St. Michael's. For the most part, children had been placed in special classes with an evaluation utilizing English language based tests and the parents were told to "sign on this line, please". Little or no explanation was given nor was input from the parent requested. The one question which takes precedence over all others at St. Michael's is, "What things do you as parents, want your child to be able to do?" There is no assumption made that the professional staff should make the final decision of what the goals of a given child's program should be. The controlling factor is, and has been since the beginning, the parents' goals for their child. This simple principle has made the program viable and vital.

Family participation in the program does not end with placement of their child. The School Board is composed of parents whose children are pupils of St. Michael's, Navajo Tribal leaders and the Director. Since all but one-fourth of the school population are bussed daily from their homes, members of the staff, not hired bus drivers, transport the students. For this reason daily contact between families and school personnel is facilitated. Not infrequently the Director drives one of the vans so she can stop to confer with the parents. When problems occur with a given student or his program appears to need revision, contact with the family is made directly and immediately. Perhaps fortunately, virtually none of the parents can be reached by telephone. This makes face-to-face conferences a necessity.

For a great many public schools, Parents Night is most disappointing. Complaints of parental indifference, poor attendance, blame placing by irate parents or defensive attitudes displayed by teachers are common.

At this school every school activity could be called a Parents Night since they make up the only audience available. In an area where entertainment form outside sources is rare, amateur productions by the students and staff draw "Standing Room Only" crowds. Each Christmas the faculty put on a show for the students and the parents. Attendance has annually exceeded all inside space. Basketball, a very popular spectator sport in most Anglo communities, is the most popular participation sport on the Reservation. Leagues of teams have been formed and the school gymasium is a blaze of light most week nights. Who make up the teams? Anyone who wants to play, parents, families and others. In truth, the school is the center of community life, second only to the tribal Chapter House.

In 1972 application was made to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to begin a special type of Kindergarden Headstart Program. Unlike traditional Headstart programs, pupils here will not come to the school, but rather, the school will go to the pupils. Mobile units under the supervision of the professional staff of St. Michael's will travel over this vast Reservation setting up programs near the homes of the exceptional pupils. In view of the pervasive philosophy of the parent as a participant in all phases of evaluation and placement, here too, the evaluation committee and monitoring groups will be composed of parents. Families will also serve as aides when called upon.

A final argument for family involvement in the psychological evaluation of minority group children lies with the orientation of the evaluating psychologist. By far the majority of school and consulting psychologists

have had little contact with nor do they come from minority group cultures. The psychologists themselves would be the first to admit that techniques and instruments which might be highly valid and relevant to the middle class Anglo would have doubtful value for use with Navajo or Hopi Indians. Yet, in most instances which have been observed by this author, this major factor has been ignored when an evaluation and placement process involved a minority group child. A variety of reasons are given for continuation of standard procedures regardless of the background of the subject. In many instances the reasons are compelling the psychologist to defend evaluations which are basically indefensible. There is something he can do. Involve the families of the child in all phases of the evaluation, placement and program planning.

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